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Bob Burden (Flaming Carrot)

Brad Foster (Mechthings)

Michael Lail (Holiday Out)

Stefano Gaudiano (Kafka)

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NO. 9 MAY 1987

Deni Loubert
Publisher

Wendi Lee
Press Liaison

Jennifer Grasberger
Assistant to the Publisher

Peter Avanzino
Circulation

Distributors:

Bud Plant Inc.
Diamond Comics
Comics Unltd. Ltd.
Capital City Dist.
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Andromeda Pub.
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by ERIC REDWOOD

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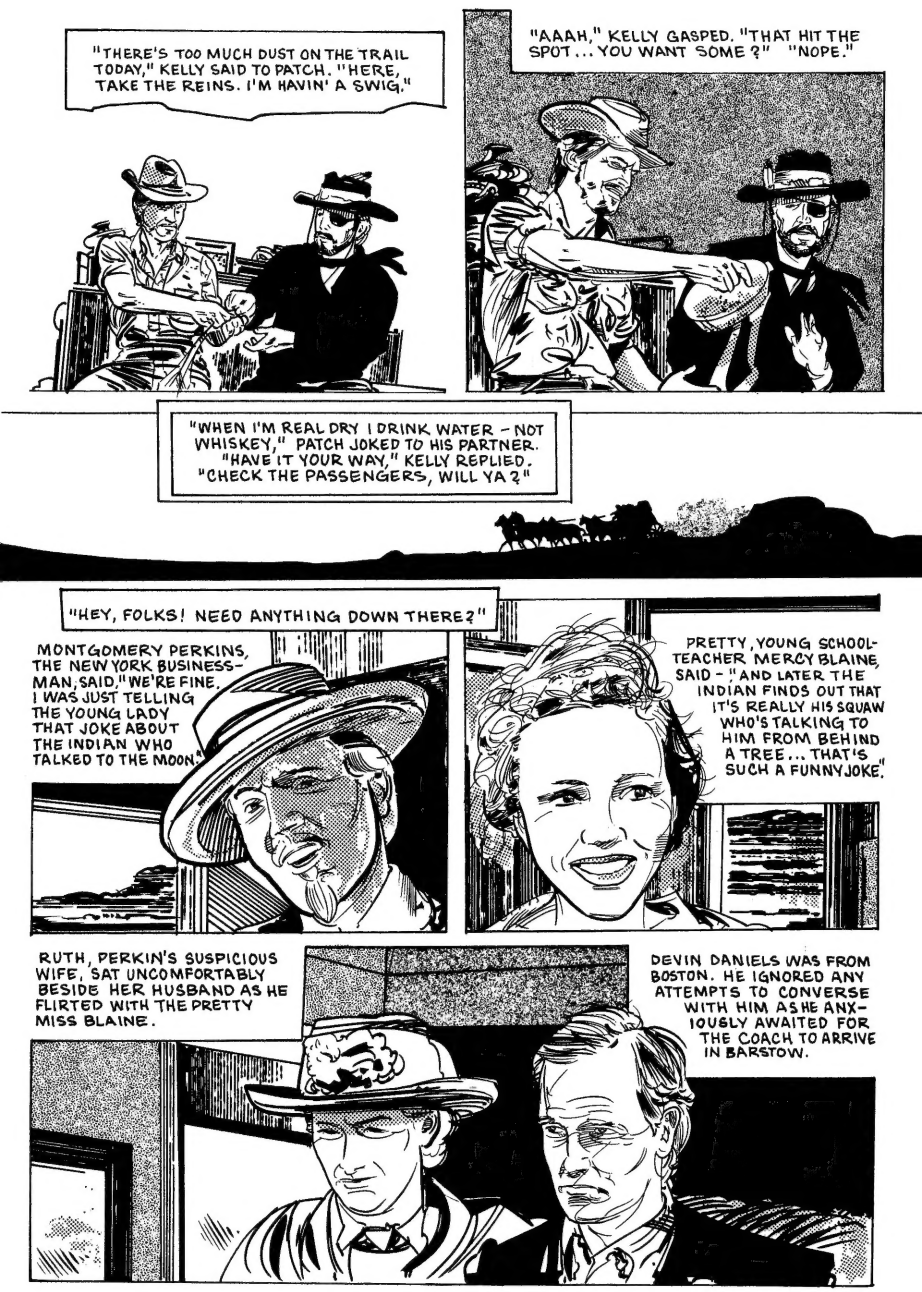
The Cactus Express was the legendary Death Valley stage that couldn't be stopped by scorching sun or raging dust storm. Then the Indian ambush came and the only man who could get the stage rolling again was another legend – by the name of Butte McCoy.

CHAPTER I
Mercy Trap


"THERE'S TOO MUCH DUST ON THE TRAIL TODAY," KELLY SAID TO PATCH. "HERE, TAKE THE REINS. I'M HAVIN' A SWIG."
"AAAH," KELLY GASPED. "THAT HIT THE SPOT... YOU WANT SOME?" "NOPE."
"WHEN I'M REAL DRY I DRINK WATER - NOT WHISKEY," PATCH JOKED TO HIS PARTNER. "HAVE IT YOUR WAY," KELLY REPLIED. "CHECK THE PASSENGERS, WILL YA?"
"HEY, FOLKS! NEED ANYTHING DOWN THERE?"
MONTGOMERY PERKINS, THE NEW YORK BUSINESS-MAN, SAID. "WE'RE FINE. I WAS JUST TELLING THE YOUNG LADY THAT JOKE ABOUT THE INDIAN WHO TALKED TO THE MOON."
PRETTY, YOUNG SCHOOL-TEACHER MERCY BLAINE, SAID - "AND LATER THE INDIAN FINDS OUT THAT IT'S REALLY HIS SQUAW WHO'S TALKING TO HIM FROM BEHIND A TREE... THAT'S SUCH A FUNNY JOKE."
RUTH, PERKIN'S SUSPICIOUS WIFE, SAT UNCOMFORTABLY BESIDE HER HUSBAND AS HE FLIRTED WITH THE PRETTY MISS BLAINE.
DEVIN DANIELS WAS FROM BOSTON. HE IGNORED ANY ATTEMPTS TO CONVERSE WITH HIM AS HE ANXIOUSLY AWAITED FOR THE COACH TO ARRIVE IN BARSTOW.

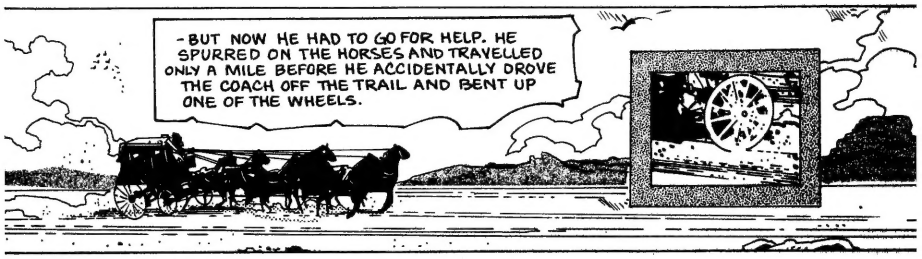
"HEY, PATCH," KELLY SAID AND POINTED HIS FINGER. "AM I SEEIN' THINGS OR IS THAT A REDSKIN UP THERE ON THE RIDGE?"
"NO, KELLY. THAT'S AN INJUN. LOOKS LIKE A NAVAHO."
"NAVAHO?" KELLY SAID. "WHAT ARE THEY DOIN' THIS FAR WEST?"
"I DUNNO. MAYBE THE PEACE TREATY GOT BUSTED."
"LOOK!" PATCH EXCLAIMED. "UP AHEAD."
"AH, FOR PETE'S SAKE. IT'S A DEAD INJUN - AND HE'S LYIN' RIGHT IN OUR PATH."
"IT'S AN INJUN KID," KELLY REPORTED. "HEY, HE'S ALIVE! I SAW HIM MOVE. DO YA THINK WE SHOULD HELP HIM?"
"I'LL GO DOWN AND TAKE A LOOK," PATCH SAID AND WARILY STEPPED OFF THE STAGE.

"WATCH IT, PATCH! IT COULD BE A TRICK."
"I KNOW. BUT IF HIS FRIENDS SEE US HELPING HIM MAYBE THEY'LL LET US GO ON IN PEACE."
"FORGET IT, PATCH! LET'S JUST KEEP GOIN' —
PATCH!"
A DOZEN INDIANS HOWLED AND SHRIEKED —
-AS THEY CHARGED FURIOUSLY DOWN OFF THE RIDGE.
THE INDIAN BOY RAN TO PICK UP PATCH'S RIFLE AND DIRECT IT AT KELLY.
KELLY SURRENDERED. HE PRAYED FOR HIS DEATH TO BE QUICK AND CLEAN.
ONE OF THE BRAVES LOOKED INTO THE COACH-
-AND HE SPOTTED MERCY. SHE SCREAMED HORRIBLY AS THE SAVAGE OPENED THE DOOR AND REACHED IN FOR HER.

MERCY WAS TOO CONFUSED TO EITHER FIGHT OR FAINT. THE OTHER PASSENGERS WATCHED HELPLESSLY AS SHE WAS DRAGGED TO A HORSE.

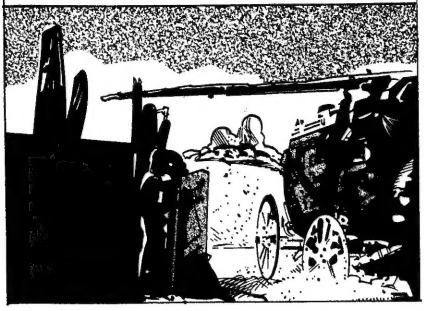
KELLY WATCHED THE RAIDING PARTY RIDE OFF WITH THEIR CAPTIVE. HE WAS GLAD THAT HE AND HIS PASSENGERS HAD BEEN SPARED A BLOODY ORDEAL —

- BUT NOW HE HAD TO GO FOR HELP. HE SPURRED ON THE HORSES AND TRAVELLED ONLY A MILE BEFORE HE ACCIDENTALLY DROVE THE COACH OFF THE TRAIL AND BENT UP ONE OF THE WHEELS.



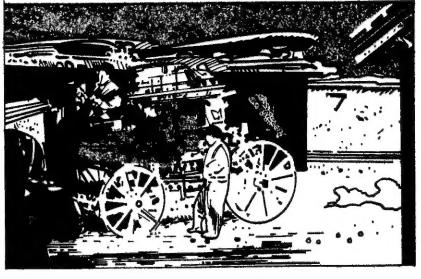
"WE CAN'T GO TOO FAR WITH THE WHEEL LIKE THIS," KELLY TOLD THE PASSENGERS AFTER HE INSPECTED THE DAMAGE.
"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?" MRS. PERKINS ASKED.

"THERE'S A PONY EXPRESS RELAY POST A FEW MILES FROM HERE," KELLY TOLD THEM. "WE'LL GO THERE AND GET HELP."



THE CACTUS EXPRESS LIMPED INTO THE SMALL 'FRESH PONY' STATION.

"WHERE'S YOUR PA, KID?" KELLY ASKED THE YOUNG LAD WHO GREETED THEM.



"THE NAME'S SILVERMAN. AND—"
"—I'M THE STATION MANAGER."
"HA!" KELLY BLURTED. "YOU? JUST MY LOUSY IRISH LUCK. HOW CAN YOU HELP ME?"
"DON'T CALL ME A KID. I CAN HANDLE MYSELF," SILVERMAN BOASTED. "THEY WOULDN'T PUT ME OUT HERE OTHERWISE."
"LISTEN, SILVERMAN," KELLY SAID. "WE WERE ATTACKED BY INJUNS AND THEY TOOK A WOMAN CAPTIVE. WE GOTTA GET WORD TO THE CAVALRY."
"HERE COMES ONE OF OUR RIDERS," SILVERMAN SAID. "HIS NAME IS BUTTE McCOY. YOU CAN ASK HIM TO HELP YOU."
McCOY WAS COVERED WITH DEATH VALLEY DUST. HE BRUSHED IT OFF HIS CLOTHES.
MRS. PERKINS COUGHED FROM THE CLOUDS OF DUST. "PLEASE," SHE SAID. "YOU'VE GOT TO SAVE THAT POOR GIRL!"
"EASY, M'AM. BUTTE USED TO BE A SCOUT FOR THE ARMY. HE'LL KNOW WHAT TO DO."

AFTER McCOY WASHED HIS FACE AT THE WELL-PUMP HE SAID, "SOME INJUNS WANT WHITE WOMEN FOR THEIR SQUAWS. SO THEY SEND OUT SPECIAL RAIDING PARTIES. THAT'S WHY THEY STOPPED YOUR COACH BUT DID NOT SLAUGHTER ALL OF YOU."

PERKINS INTRODUCED HIMSELF AND VOLUNTEERED TO HELP McCOY.

"I KNOW I'M PAST MY PRIME," PERKINS SAID.

"ME AND THE KID WILL STAY HERE AND FIX THE WHEEL," KELLY SAID. "YOU BETTER LEAVE MR. DANIELS HERE, TOO. TO STAND GUARD."

"THANKS," BUTTE SAID. "NOT THAT I'M UNGRATEFUL, SIR, BUT ARE YOU SURE YOU'RE ABLE-BODIED TO DO THIS?"

"BUT THAT POOR GIRL REMINDS ME OF A FAVOURITE NIECE OF MINE. I'VE GOT TO HELP SAVE HER."

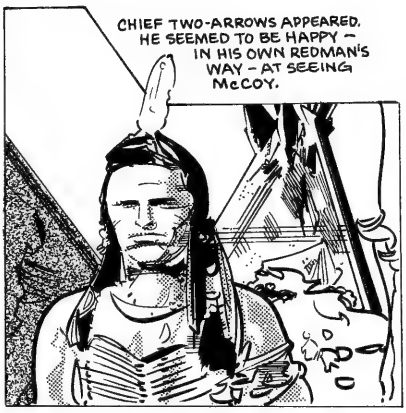
"I'M ENTRUSTING YOU WITH ALL MY VALUABLES, YOUNG MAN," PERKINS SAID AS HE HANDED DANIELS HIS VALISE.

"I DON'T LIKE THAT GUY DANIELS," BUTTE MUTTERED AS THEY PREPARED THEIR HORSES.

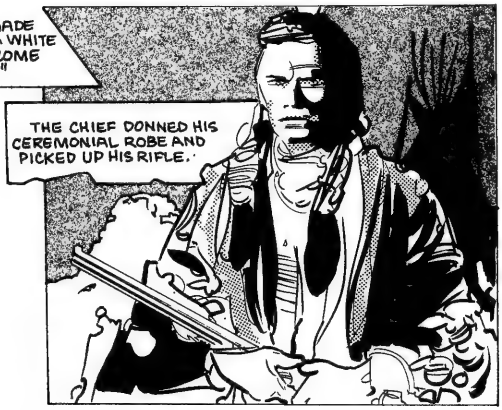
"WHAT ARE OUR CHANCES OF GETTING THE GIRL BACK, MR. McCOY?" PERKINS ASKED AS THEY SET OFF.
"CALL ME BUTTE," McCOY SAID. "OUR CHANCES AREN'T AS SLIM AS YOU THINK. WE'VE GOT AN EARLY START, SO IT WON'T BE HARD TO TRACK 'EM. AND SINCE I SPEAK NAVAHO I THINK I CAN PERSUADE 'EM TO RELEASE HER."
"I'LL HAVE IT FIXED UP BY TOMORROW," SILVERMAN SAID. "HOW DID YOU BUST 'ER UP?"
"JUST GOIN' TOO FAST," KELLY SAID AND OFFERED HIS CANTEEN TO THE KID.
"BY THE WAY, SILVERMAN," KELLY STARTED TO SAY.
"... THAT AIN'T WATER."
"YOU LITTLE NO-GOOD RUNT," KELLY EXPLODED. "WHY DID YOU DO THAT?"
"YOU BUSTED UP THE COACH BECAUSE YOU WERE DRIVIN' DRUNK, KELLY. I NEED YOU SOBER NOW - WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT."

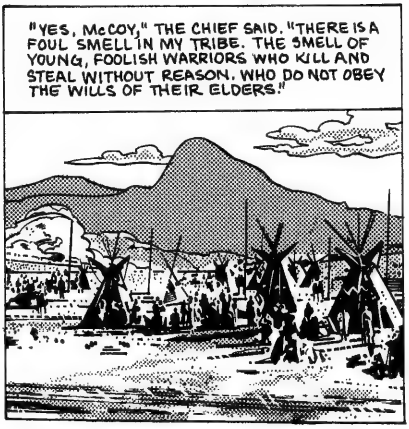
INSIDE THE SMALL CABIN MRS. PERKINS BECAME HYSTERICAL OVER THE TERRIBLE EVENTS OF THE DAY.
SHE WAS RANTING ON ABOUT GOD AND THE DEVIL. DANIELS SLAPPED HER OUT OF HER FIT.
BACK EAST DANIELS WAS THE BLACK SHEEP OF HIS WEALTHY FAMILY. HE HAD CHEATED AND BETRAYED EVERY-ONE HE KNEW.
SO HE WAS SENT WEST - TO START ANEW.
HE BROKE INTO THE VALISE WITHOUT A SHRED OF GUILT.
BUTTE McCOY AND MONTGOMERY PERKINS REACHED THE NAVAHO VILLAGE WITHIN A DAY AFTER LEAVING THE STATION.
"IT'S THE WHITE HORSE TRIBE," BUTTE TOLD PERKINS. "I KNOW THEIR LEADER, CHIEF TWO ARROWS."

McCOY PUT THE VILLAGERS AT EASE, GREETING THEM IN A GENTLE, RESPECTFUL TONE OF VOICE IN THEIR OWN TONGUE.

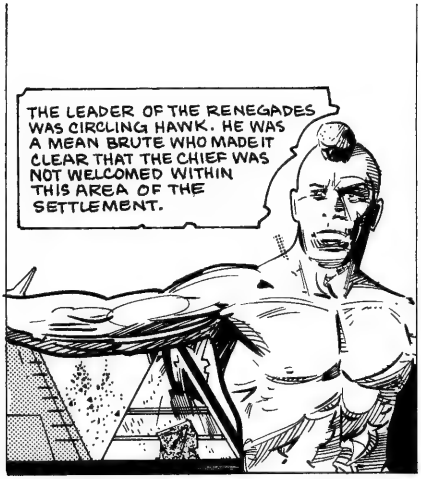

CHIEF TWO-ARROWS APPEARED. HE SEEMED TO BE HAPPY — IN HIS OWN REDMAN'S WAY — AT SEEING McCOY.

"SOME OF YOUR RENEGADE BRAVES HAVE STOLEN A WHITE WOMAN, CHIEF. I'VE COME TO TAKE HER BACK."

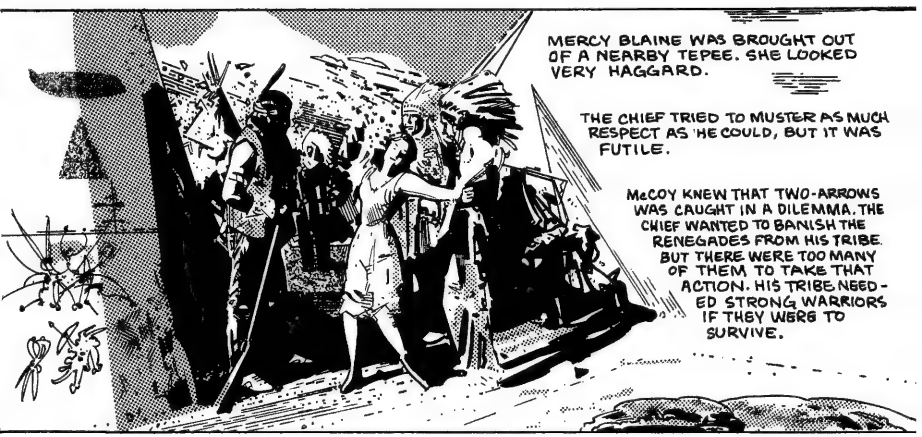

THE CHIEF DONNED HIS CEREMONIAL ROBE AND PICKED UP HIS RIFLE.


"YES, McCOY," THE CHIEF SAID. "THERE IS A FOUL SMELL IN MY TRIBE. THE SMELL OF YOUNG, FOOLISH WARRIORS WHO KILL AND STEAL WITHOUT REASON. WHO DO NOT OBEY THE WILLS OF THEIR ELDERS."

"FOLLOW ME, MY FRIEND," THE CHIEF SAID. "I WILL SHOW YOU THE THIEVES YOU SEEK." THEN THE CHIEF JOKED, "HOLD YOUR NOSE AGAINST THE FOUL SMELL."


THE LEADER OF THE RENEGADES WAS CIRCLING HAWK. HE WAS A MEAN BRUTE WHO MADE IT CLEAR THAT THE CHIEF WAS NOT WELCOMED WITHIN THIS AREA OF THE SETTLEMENT.

THE CHIEF DEMANDED THAT CIRCLING HAWK SHOW HIM THE KIDNAPPED WOMAN AND EXPLAIN WHY HE WANTED TO OWN A WHITE SQUAW.


MERCY BLAINE WAS BROUGHT OUT OF A NEARBY TEPEE. SHE LOOKED VERY HAGGARD.
THE CHIEF TRIED TO MUSTER AS MUCH RESPECT AS HE COULD, BUT IT WAS FUTILE.
McCOY KNEW THAT TWO-ARROWS WAS CAUGHT IN A DILEMMA. THE CHIEF WANTED TO BANISH THE RENEGADES FROM HIS TRIBE. BUT THERE WERE TOO MANY OF THEM TO TAKE THAT ACTION. HIS TRIBE NEEDED STRONG WARRIORS IF THEY WERE TO SURVIVE.

"I CLAIM THE WHITE WOMAN AS MY PROPERTY, BY THE RIGHT OF THE HUNT."

"I CHALLENGE YOUR CLAIM," McCOY ANNOUNCED GRIMLY.

"THIS IS NOT A MATTER OF HONOR," THE CHIEF SAID. "YOU WILL NOT FIGHT TO THE DEATH. BUT THE VICTOR OF THE BATTLE WILL BE FREE TO CLAIM THE WOMAN."

CIRCLING HAWK COULD NOT BACK OUT OF THE FIGHT NOW. ALL THE TRIBE WAS WATCHING HIM. EARLY IN THE BATTLE THE RENEGADE INDIAN DEMONSTRATED HIS AWESOME STRENGTH. HE PICKED UP McCOY AND THREW HIM TO THE GROUND AS IF HE WERE PLAYING WITH A BIG DISLODGED TREE STUMP.

McCOY KEPT HIS DISTANCE AND MADE THE INDIAN EXPEND MORE OF HIS STRENGTH THAN HE HAD TO. BUTTE HIT THE RENEGADE WITH SOLID BLOWS, FORCING CIRCLING HAWK DOWN. MOST OTHER MEN WOULD HAVE BEEN KNOCKED SENSELESS, BUT THE BIG INDIAN ABSORBED THE PUGILISTIC PUNISHMENT.

AT ONE POINT BUTTE FOUND HIMSELF RIDING ASTRIDE THE INDIAN'S BACK AS IF HE WERE IN A RODEO-SHOW WORKING ON A BUCKING BRONC. MANY OF THE VILLAGERS LAUGHED AS CIRCLING HAWK WAS HUMILIATED. THE INDIAN FINALLY REMOVED McCOY FROM HIS BACK AFTER GREAT EFFORT AND ROLLED TO SAFETY.

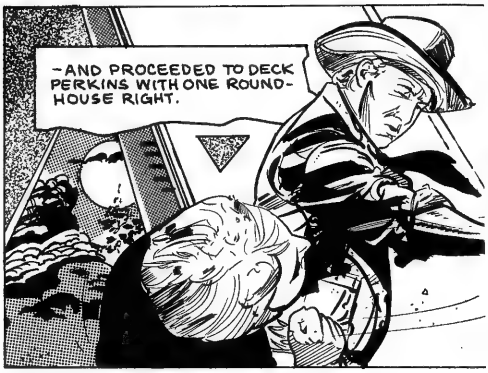
CIRCLING HAWK WAS EXHAUSTED. HE DESPERATELY TRIED TO END THE FIGHT, THROWING A HANDFUL OF DIRT INTO BUTTE'S FACE. ALTHOUGH BLINDED, McCOY ELUDED THE RENEGADE'S CHARGE. HE TWISTED THE INDIAN AROUND AND PINNED HIS ARM BEHIND HIS BACK UNTIL HE SURRENDERED.

PERKINS QUICKLY MOVED IN TO COMFORT MERCY. "YOU'RE SAFE NOW, MY DEAR," HE ASSURED HER.
BUTTE WATCHED THEM WALK AWAY WITH RESENTFUL EYES. PERKINS WOULD BE THE HERO LATER ALTHOUGH HE HAD NO SCARS OR BRUISES TO SHOW FOR IT.
"YOU ARE WELCOME TO STAY WITH US TONIGHT," THE CHIEF SAID.
"WE WILL PROTECT YOU," HE ADDED
A SMALL MEAL WAS PRESENTED TO THE THREE OF THEM. MERCY SMILED AT BUTTE AND THANKED HIM FOR SAVING HER. PERKINS INTERRUPTED AND DIDN'T STOP TALKING UNTIL IT WAS TIME TO SLEEP.
A COYOTE CRIED OUT AND STARTLED MERCY OUT OF HER SOUND SLEEP. SHE SCREAMED —
– AND MOVED CLOSER TO PERKINS. "LIE WITH ME, MY DEAR," HE TOLD HER. "YOU'LL BE SAFE."

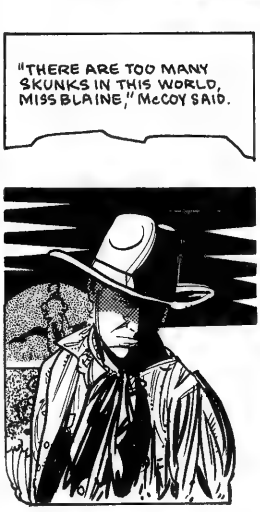
MERCY INNOCENTLY ACCEPTED COMFORT FROM PERKINS, LITTLE KNOWING THAT THE EASTERNER HAD EVIL DESIGNS UPON HER FLESH.

HIS DEVIOUS HANDS SOON STRAYED BEYOND COMFORT AND SYMPATHY. MERCY SHOUTED HER DEFIANCE AND SHE TURNED INTO A WILDCAT TO PROTECT HER HONOR.

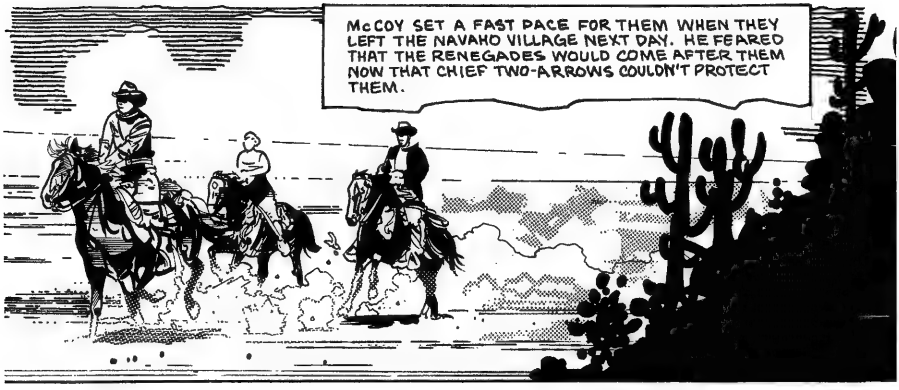
"HASN'T SHE BEEN THROUGH ENOUGH?" McCOY SAID —


—AND PROCEEDED TO DECK PERKINS WITH ONE ROUND-HOUSE RIGHT.

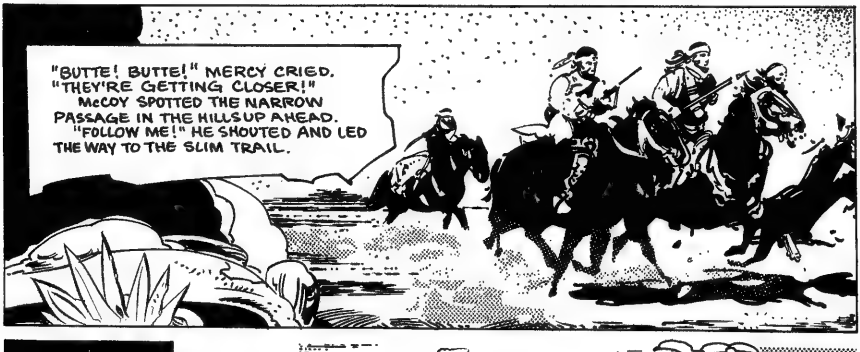
BUTTE ADMIRED MERCY'S FORTITUDE. SHE LAUGHED AND SAID, "I NEVER THOUGHT YOU'D SAVE ME TWICE IN ONE NIGHT."


"THERE ARE TOO MANY SKUNKS IN THIS WORLD, MISS BLAINE," McCOY SAID.

"PLEASE; AFTER ALL YOU'VE DONE FOR ME, YOU MUST CALL ME MERCY."
"OKAY. MY NAME'S BERT; BUT I LIKE PEOPLE TO CALL ME BUTTE."
"CAN I SLEEP BESIDE YOU, BUTTE?" SHE ASKED COYLY.
BUTTE SMILED AND SAID, "I'D BE HONORED, MERCY."


McCOY SET A FAST PACE FOR THEM WHEN THEY LEFT THE NAVAHO VILLAGE NEXT DAY. HE FEARED THAT THE RENEGADES WOULD COME AFTER THEM NOW THAT CHIEF TWO-ARROWS COULDN'T PROTECT THEM.

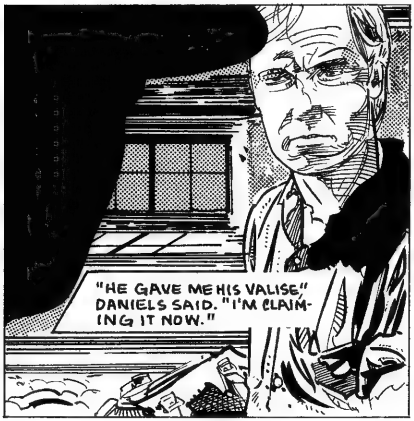
McCOY FEARED RIGHT. CIRCLING HAWK'S FOLLOWERS WERE WATCHING THEM AND TRAILING THEM; WAITING TO STRIKE IN MUCH THE SAME MANNER AS THE NAME OF THEIR LEADER.


"BUTTE! BUTTE!" MERCY CRIED. "THEY'RE GETTING CLOSER!"
McCOY SPOTTED THE NARROW PASSAGE IN THE HILLS UP AHEAD. "FOLLOW ME!" HE SHOUTED AND LED THE WAY TO THE SLIM TRAIL.

MANY SHOTS ECHOED ACROSS THE PLAIN. BULLETS SEARED THE AIR PAST McCOY AND THE OTHERS.
BUTTE STEERED HIS HORSE BESIDE PERKINS AND TOLD HIM TO JUMP OFF HIS LAME STEED ONTO McCOY'S HEALTHY ONE.
JUST AS PERKINS PREPARED TO MAKE THE JUMP A SLUG BURROWED INTO HIS BACK AND HE DROPPED TO THE GROUND.
R.T. F.R.
BUTTE DROPPED OFF HIS HORSE AND STOOD WITH HIS REPEATING RIFLE AIMED AT HIS ATTACKERS.
IF HE WAS GOING TO GO DOWN HE WAS DETERMINED TO GO DOWN SHOOTING.
THEN HE DISCOVERED THAT MANY OF THE SHOTS HE'D HEARD WERE NOT COMING FROM THE RIFLES OF THE RENEGADES. THE SHOTS WERE COMING FROM A BAND OF BRAVES THAT HAD BEEN SENT BY CHIEF TWO-ARROWS TO HELP THEM.
BUTTE AND MERCY ATTENDED TO THE MORTALLY WOUNDED PERKINS.
"I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A FAILURE," PERKINS SAID. "I THOUGHT THE WEST WOULD CHANGE ME. BUT IT'S TOO LATE... IT'S TOO LATE."

"HAVEN'T YOU GOT THAT WHEEL FIXED YET?" McCOY ASKED THE KID WHEN HE RETURNED TO THE PONY EXPRESS POST.

"YEAH. IT'S FIXED. WHERE'S PERKINS?" SILVERMAN ASKED.
"HE MET HIS MAKER," McCOY ANSWERED.


"HE GAVE ME HIS VALISE," DANIELS SAID. "I'M CLAIMING IT NOW."

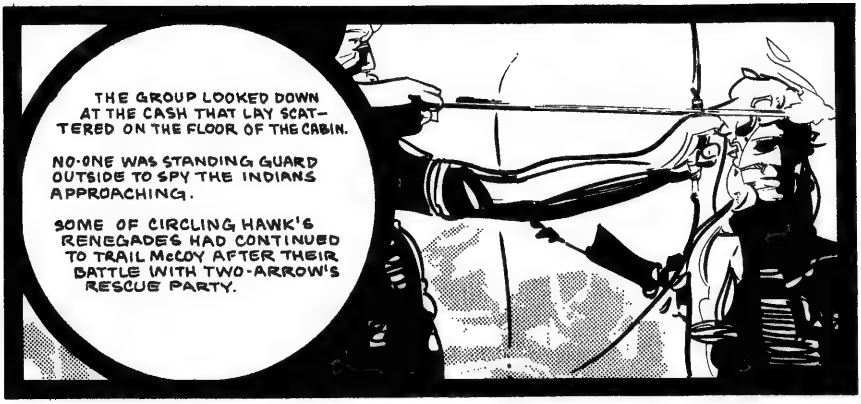
"NO, YOU'RE NOT, DANIELS," McCOY BARKED. "THAT'S PROPERTY OF HIS WIFE AND FAMILY."

"BUT THERE'S NOTHING IN IT OF ANY VALUE," DANIELS PLEADED. "JUST SOME PAPERS AND TRINKETS."
THE KID QUIETLY MOVED BEHIND DANIELS AND GRABBED THE VALISE. THEY PULLED ON THE CARPET-BAG UNTIL IT BROKE APART AND THE FORTUNE IN STOLEN BANK NOTES SPILLED OUT.

THE GROUP LOOKED DOWN AT THE CASH THAT LAY SCATTERED ON THE FLOOR OF THE CABIN.

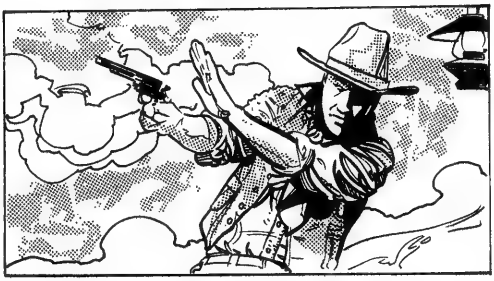
NO-ONE WAS STANDING GUARD OUTSIDE TO SPY THE INDIANS APPROACHING.

SOME OF CIRCLING HAWK'S RENEGADES HAD CONTINUED TO TRAIL McCOY AFTER THEIR BATTLE WITH TWO-ARROW'S RESCUE PARTY.



THE FLAME ARROWS HIT THE ROOF OF THE CABIN. FIRE SPREAD WITH WILD ABANDON.

McCOY LED THE WAY OUT OF THE CABIN, HIS PEACEMAKER BLASTING.
"EVERYONE GET TO THE STAGE BEFORE THEY SET IT ON FIRE, TOO," BUTTE SHOUTED.



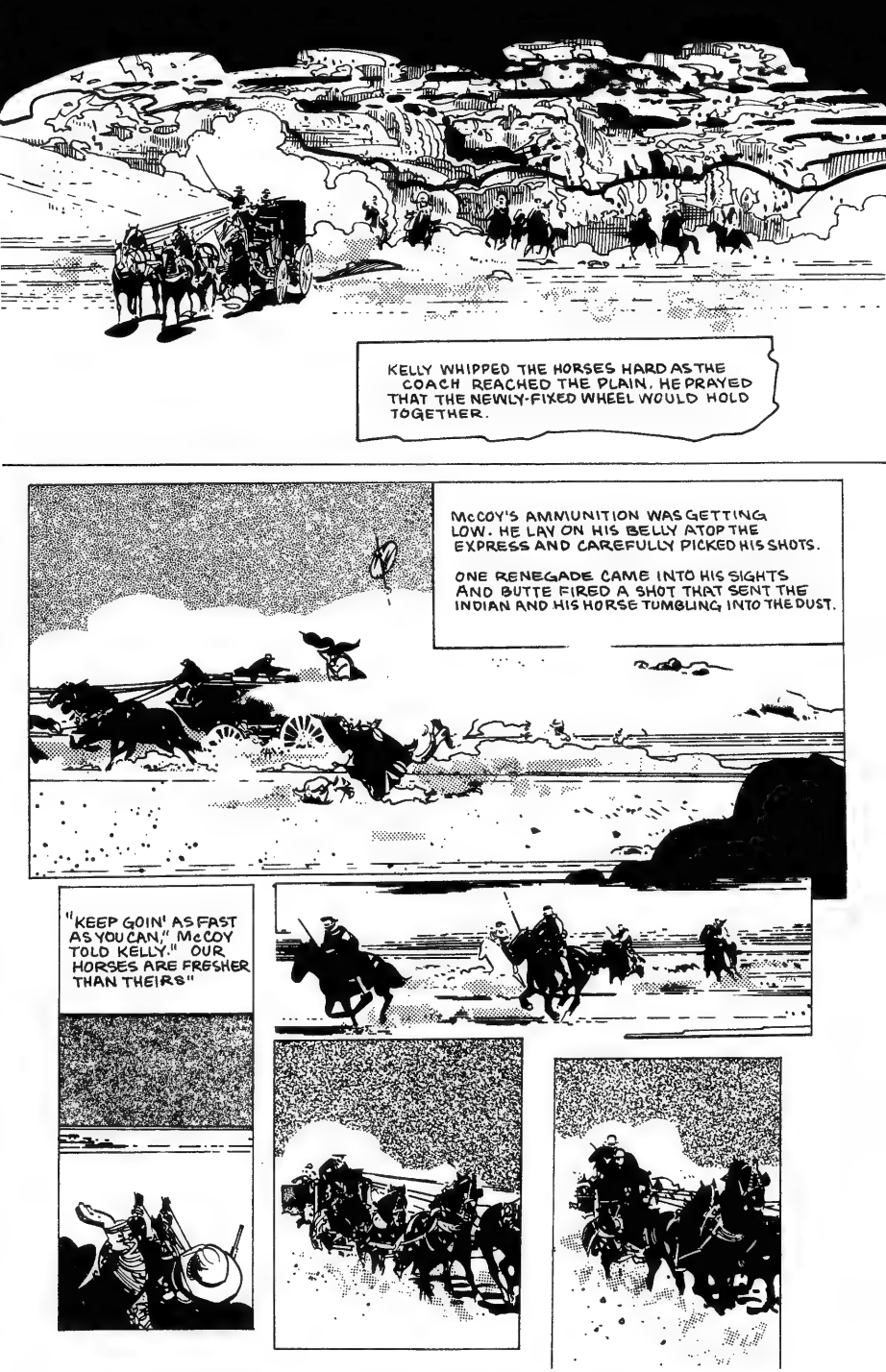
"COME ON, KID!" McCOY SAID. "YOU CAN'T STAY HERE!"

THE KID RAN HALF-WAY TO THE STAGE, THEN HE STOPPED IN HIS TRACKS.

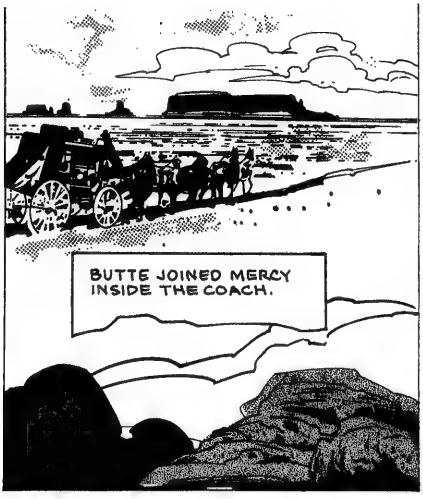
"DANIELS IS STILL IN THE CABIN!"

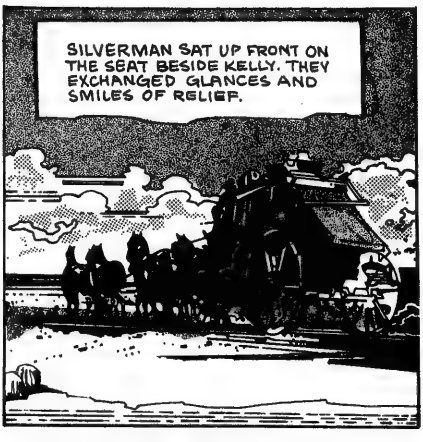
DANIELS WAS DESPERATELY TRYING TO SAVE THE MONEY.

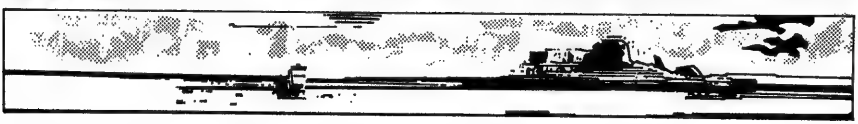
DANIELS WAS TRAPPED IN HIS OWN FUNERAL PYRE OF GREED. HE SCREAMED AS THE FLAMES ENGULFED HIM.
"I'LL TRY AND GET HIM OUT," THE KID SAID.
"FORGET IT," KELLY ORDERED AND PULLED SILVERMAN AWAY.
"JUST GET IN THE COACH AND BLAST THOSE REDSKINS TO KINGDOM COME!" KELLY ADDED.
"GET THIS THING ROLLING!" McCOY SHOUTED TO KELLY AS BUTTE KNEELED ATOP THE CACTUS EXPRESS AND WORKED HIS WINCHESTER INTO A WHITE HEAT. A COUPLE OF THE RENEGADES DROPPED DEAD FROM HIS SHOTS.
DOZENS OF ARROWS PIERCED THE COACH. TWO TIMES McCOY HAD TO STOP SHOOTING TO REACH DOWN TO PLUCK A FLAME ARROW OUT OF THE COACH'S SIDE.


KELLY WHIPPED THE HORSES HARD AS THE COACH REACHED THE PLAIN. HE PRAYED THAT THE NEWLY-FIXED WHEEL WOULD HOLD TOGETHER.
McCOY'S AMMUNITION WAS GETTING LOW. HE LAY ON HIS BELLY ATOP THE EXPRESS AND CAREFULLY PICKED HIS SHOTS.
ONE RENEGADE CAME INTO HIS SIGHTS AND BUTTE FIRED A SHOT THAT SENT THE INDIAN AND HIS HORSE TUMBLING INTO THE DUST.
"KEEP GOIN' AS FAST AS YOU CAN," McCOY TOLD KELLY." OUR HORSES ARE FRESHER THAN THEIRS"

"LOOK!" McCOY POINTED TO THE DISTANCE. "THE ARMY!"
THE CAVALRY FIERCELY HURLED THEMSELVES AT THE RENEGADE INDIANS AS THE TRUMPET SOUNDED THE CALL TO CHARGE.
"HEY, KID!" KELLY YELLED TO SILVERMAN. "TELL THE LADIES WE'RE SAFE NOW. IT'S ALL OVER."







"Well, kid. Do you ever get excitement like this workin' for the Pony Express?" Kelly asked and laughed.

"Nope," Silverman replied and joined in the laughter. "Uh, do ya think the stage line would consider me as a replacement for that guy Patch?"

"Well, I dunno – you're kinda young," Kelly said.

"I'm twenty-three years old and I know how to handle myself."

"Oh, yeah? You can't even stomach a swig of hooch. I don't want no partner of mine who can't drink his share of snake medicine."

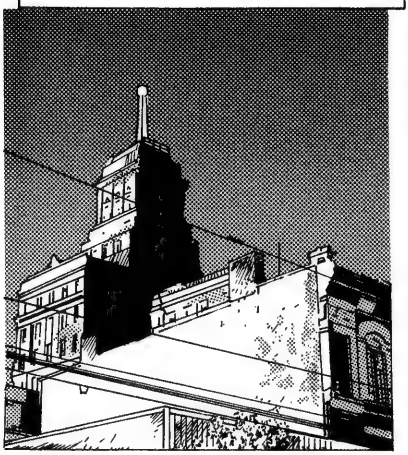
"When we get into town we'll go to the first saloon and I'll show you how to get pickled."

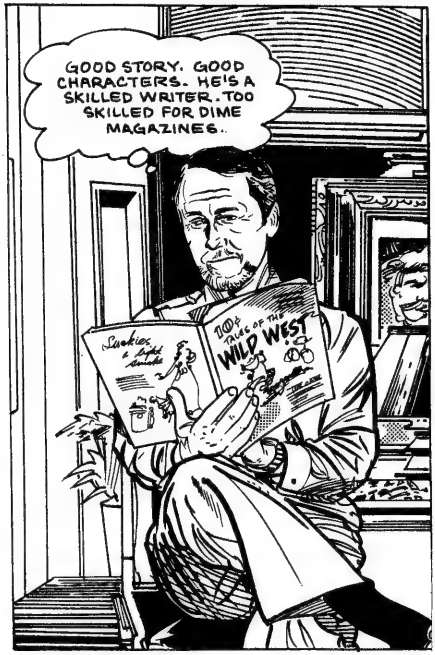
Kelly laughed and thumped Silverman once on the back.

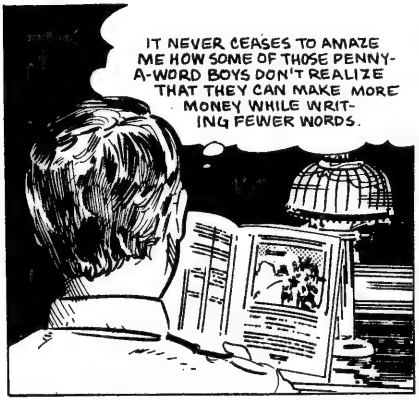
"That's the spirit, kid!" he said. "Welcome to the Cactus Express."

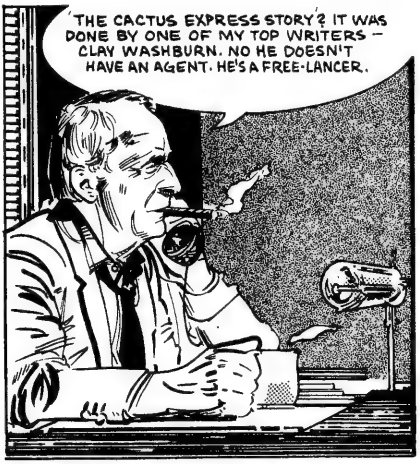
THE END

NEVILLE HARCOURT'S LITERARY AGENCY OFFICE WAS IN A LOFTY PERCH FAR REMOVED FROM THE DEPRESSION-CLOAKED STREETS OF THE CITY. AND HARCOURT'S MIND WAS FAR REMOVED FROM THE CONCRETE SPRAWL OF NEW YORK AS HE IMAGINED THE CACTUS EXPRESS CROSSING THE PLAINS OF THE OLD WEST.






IT NEVER CEASES TO AMAZE ME HOW SOME OF THOSE PENNY-A-WORD BOYS DON'T REALIZE THAT THEY CAN MAKE MORE MONEY WHILE WRITING FEWER WORDS.



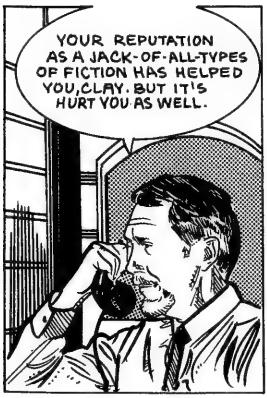
YEAH, I CAN PUT YOU IN TOUCH WITH HIM.
THANKS, SAM. AS YOU KNOW, I LOST HANK ROSSITER TO A RIVAL FIRM A FEW MONTHS AGO AND I'M LOOKING TO GROOM A NEW WRITER TO BE THE KING OF THE COWBOY STORIES.

"I THINK THIS WASHBURN FELLOW COULD BE THE RIGHT MAN," HARCOURT SAID. "I LIKE HIS NAME. CLAY WASHBURN. IT HAS A GOOD WESTERN RING TO IT."

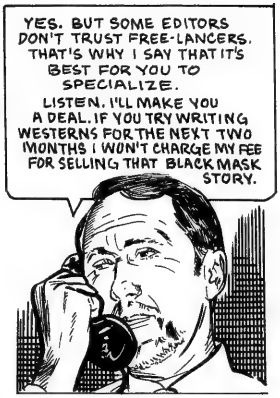
YES, SPEAKING.
WHO? ... NEVILLE HARCOURT? ... OH, HE'S AN AGENT... WHY DON'T THESE GUYS LEAVE ME ALONE. THEY DON'T DESERVE TEN PERCENT OF ANY WORK THAT I DO.

DESPITE MY MISGIVINGS I FOUND MYSELF AT HARCOURT'S OFFICE THE NEXT DAY.
HE'S A FRIEND OF SAM KAISER'S. IT WON'T HURT TO HEAR HIM OUT.
THANKS FOR COMING, CLAY.
I KNOW HOW YOU WORDSMITHS HATE TO BE AWAY TOO LONG FROM YOUR TYPEWRITERS, BUT I'M SURE THE TIME YOU SPEND HERE —
— WILL BE WORTH IT. EXCUSE ME.
rrinnggg
SOME OF THESE PAINTINGS MUST HAVE COST HIM A FORTUNE. NOW I KNOW WHERE MY TEN PERCENT WOULD BE GOING.
SAM TELLS ME THAT YOU HAVE NEVER HAD AN AGENT. ISN'T THERE SOME WAY TO CONVINCE YOU THAT WE CAN BENEFIT FROM EACH OTHER?
WELL, I'VE NEVER SOLD A STORY TO BLACK MASK. IF YOU SOLD ONE FOR ME...
... I'D FIND THAT CONVINCING.
BLACK MASK, EH? TELL ME, DO YOU SEE YOURSELF AS A DETECTIVE WRITER? ADVENTURE WRITER? WESTERN?

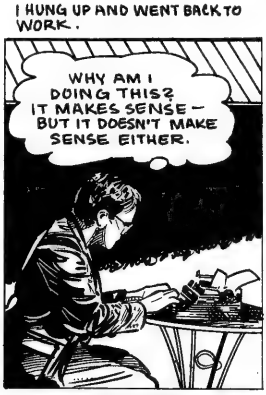
... ALL OF THEM.
WHY DON'T YOU SPECIALIZE IN ONE OF THEM. TAKE THIS WESTERN STORY YOU DID - THE CACTUS EXPRESS.
THE CACTUS EXPRESS
ERIC REDWOOD
I THINK IT WOULD MAKE AN EXCELLENT WESTERN NOVEL IN BOOK FORM. AND POSSIBLY A FILM SCRIPT AFTER THAT... I HAVE CONNECTIONS IN PUBLISHING AND IN HOLLYWOOD.
YOU'RE LIMITING YOURSELF IN THE PULPS, CLAY. I'M NOT SAYING YOU SHOULD GIVE THEM UP ENTIRELY - BUT YOU'RE NOT EXPLOITING YOUR SKILLS AS LUCRATIVELY AS YOU COULD. THAT'S WHERE I CAN HELP YOU.
WITH SOME REFINING, AND SOME DIRECTION, YOUR WORDS COULD MAKE YOU A RICH MAN.
I WON'T DENY THAT YOU'RE TALKSENSE, NEVILLE, BUT...
... LET'S FACE IT, I COULD MAKE MYSELF TEN PERCENT RICHER BY LEAVING YOUR OFFICE RIGHT NOW.
HAH, HA, HA. TRUST ME, CLAY. I'M WORTH EVERY PENNY. REALLY.
OKAY, WISE GUY. IF YOU'RE SO GOOD LET'S SEE IF YOU CAN SELL ONE OF MY STORIES TO BLACK MASK.
TAP TAP TAP rrriiing!
HELLO, CLAY. IT'S NEVILLE. I'VE SOLD YOUR NEW HEADLINE O'HARA STORY TO BLACK MASK. THEY LIKED IT VERY MUCH.
YOU'RE KIDDING. GEEZ, I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY. I'VE HAD ALMOST FIFTY REJECTIONS FROM THEM. EVEN SOME OF MY BEST BRASS KNUCKLES BENDIX STORIES.

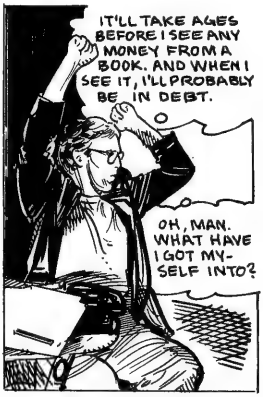

YOUR REPUTATION AS A JACK-OF-ALL-TYPES OF FICTION HAS HELPED YOU, CLAY. BUT IT'S HURT YOU AS WELL.

HUH? WHY'S THAT? ALL MY STORIES ARE GOOD, AREN'T THEY?


YES. BUT SOME EDITORS DON'T TRUST FREE-LANCERS. THAT'S WHY I SAY THAT IT'S BEST FOR YOU TO SPECIALIZE.
LISTEN. I'LL MAKE YOU A DEAL. IF YOU TRY WRITING WESTERNS FOR THE NEXT TWO MONTHS I WON'T CHARGE MY FEE FOR SELLING THAT BLACK MASK STORY.

HA! OKAY, IT'S A DEAL. I'LL FINISH UP ALL MY WORK IN PROGRESS AND THEN I'LL CONCENTRATE ON EXPANDING THE CACTUS EXPRESS INTO A BOOK-LENGTH STORY.


I HUNG UP AND WENT BACK TO WORK.
WHY AM I DOING THIS? IT MAKES SENSE — BUT IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE EITHER.


IT'LL TAKE AGES BEFORE I SEE ANY MONEY FROM A BOOK. AND WHEN I SEE IT, I'LL PROBABLY BE IN DEBT.
OH, MAN. WHAT HAVE I GOT MYSELF INTO?

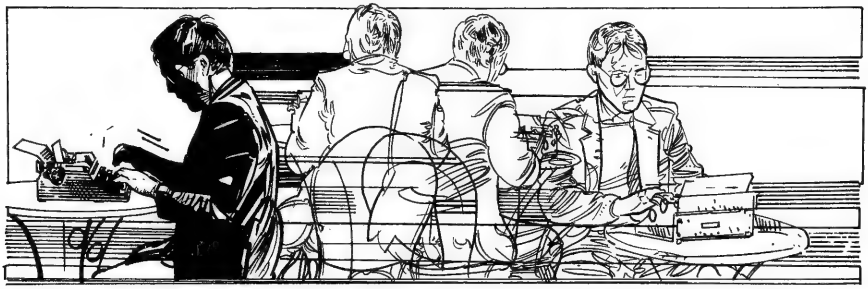
I'M SUCCESSFUL THE WAY I AM. I SHOULDN'T CHANGE ANYTHING. I'VE WORKED ALL THESE YEARS TO GET TO THIS STAGE. I REMEMBER WHEN I STARTED OUT WITH ONE RENTED TYPEWRITER. IT TOOK ME A WEEK TO DO A STORY THAT I CAN WRITE IN ONE DAY NOW. AND NOW INSTEAD OF ONE TYPEWRITER, I OWN FOUR OF MY OWN.

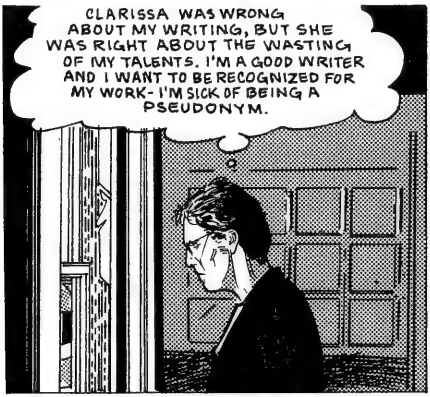
BUT HOW LONG CAN I KEEP THIS UP? I'M NOT GETTING ANY YOUNGER. AND WHAT ABOUT THE PULPS? THEY WON'T BE AROUND FOREVER.

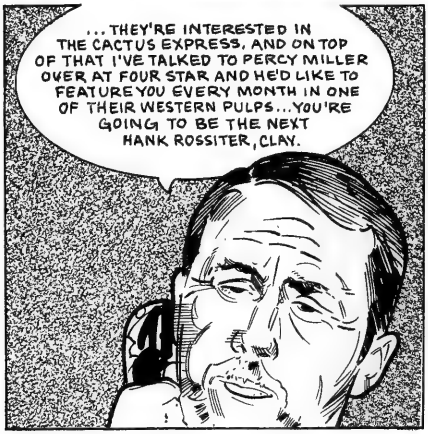
I IMMERSED MYSELF IN MY WORK IN AN ATTEMPT TO PUT OFF THE DOUBTS AND WORRIES THAT PLAGUED ME.

LIFE WAS SO SIMPLE IN MY STORIES. MY CHARACTERS MADE MOMENTOUS DECISIONS ABOUT LIFE AND DEATH, AND THEY ALWAYS KNEW THE RIGHT PATH TO TAKE TO THEIR HAPPY ENDINGS.

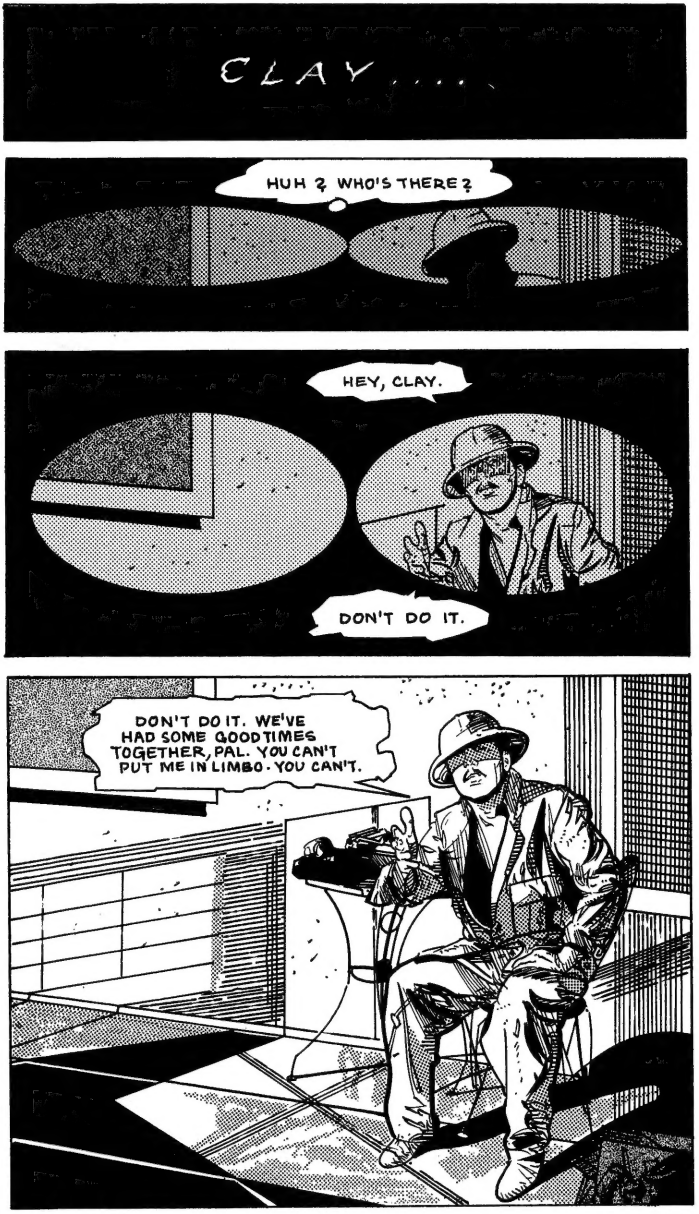
BUT, IN REALITY - IN MY REALITY - I WAS LIKE EVERYONE ELSE. AFRAID OF THE FUTURE. AND WHEN I CAME TO A FORK IN THE ROAD I LOOKED FOR THE SIGN-POST THAT SAID **HAPPY VALLEY**. THEN, WHEN I COULDN'T SEE IT, I IMAGINED THAT ALL THE SIGN-POSTS READ THE SAME THING - **DEAD END**.




CLARISSA WAS WRONG ABOUT MY WRITING, BUT SHE WAS RIGHT ABOUT THE WASTING OF MY TALENTS. I'M A GOOD WRITER AND I WANT TO BE RECOGNIZED FOR MY WORK - I'M SICK OF BEING A PSEUDONYM.


...THEY'RE INTERESTED IN THE CACTUS EXPRESS, AND ON TOP OF THAT I'VE TALKED TO PERCY MILLER OVER AT FOUR STAR AND HE'D LIKE TO FEATURE YOU EVERY MONTH IN ONE OF THEIR WESTERN PULPS... YOU'RE GOING TO BE THE NEXT HANK ROSSITER, CLAY.

I DECIDED TO TAKE A BATH TO HELP ME RELAX.
SOME WRITERS WOULD GIVE THEIR RIGHT ARM TO HAVE MY SUCCESS.
I SHOULD KNOW. I USED TO BE ONE OF THEM.
AAAAH! THIS IS WHAT I NEEDED..I CAN'T THINK PROPERLY WHEN I'M TENSE.
I REALLY DIDN'T SOUND VERY EXCITED TO HARCOURT WHEN HE TOLD ME THE GOOD NEWS... GOD, HOW I'VE CHANGED! A FEW YEARS AGO I WOULD HAVE JUMPED THROUGH HOOPS IN MY EAGERNESS TO GRAB FOR THE BRASS RING.
AFTER MY BATH I PULLED OUT SOME PICTURE BOOKS ON THE OLD WEST FROM MY REFERENCE LIBRARY TO STUDY THEM.
I WAS MORE TIRED THAN I THOUGHT.
FREDERIC REMINGTON


CLAY....
HUH ? WHO'S THERE ?
HEY, CLAY.
DON'T DO IT.
DON'T DO IT. WE'VE HAD SOME GOODTIMES TOGETHER, PAL. YOU CAN'T PUT ME IN LIMBO. YOU CAN'T.

OH, MY GAWD!!
I DON'T BELIEVE IT!
HE WAS THERE!
IT WASN'T MY IMAGINATION! HE WAS REALLY THERE! CONGO CARSON WAS TALKING TO ME!
THE NEXT DAY I BARGED IN ON HARCOURT WITHOUT AN APPOINTMENT.
I KNOW THIS SOUNDS CRAZY, NEVILLE, BUT LAST NIGHT I SAW A GHOST. IT WAS ONE OF MY FICTIONAL CHARACTERS... AND HE TALKED TO ME! I SWEAR IT!
HA, HA, HA! OKAY I'LL BITE. WHAT DID HE SAY?
I DON'T - I DON'T EXPECT YOU TO BELIEVE ME. I WOULDN'T IF I WERE YOU. BUT ONE OF MY OWN CREATIONS WAS PLEADING FOR HIS LIFE... AND I CAN'T IGNORE HIM. I JUST CAN'T!

I TOLD NEVILLE THAT I WANTED TO RETAIN HIM AS MY AGENT FROM NOW ON. I ALSO TOLD HIM THAT I WANTED TO CALL MY OWN SHOTS. I WASN'T GOING TO BE THE NEXT HANK ROSSITER JUST BECAUSE HE WISHED IT.
'THE GOLDEN LION OF THE NILE' A CONGO CARSON NOVELETTE BY HUGO VELDT.
GET READY, CONGO. YOU'RE COMING BACK TO LIFE AGAIN... OUT OF LIMBO BY WAY OF MY TYPEWRITER!

Story: Dave Darrigo
Art: R.G. Taylor
Lettering: Les Taylor

This issue is dedicated to the great hero-makers of fiction, film and comics who, in the last 80-odd years, have helped us keep our sanity in one very insane century.